

Pursuance

The Movement of *The Common Wind*

The magisterial power of *The Common Wind* is evidenced by its constituent narratives. For the most part they are fragmentary. Some run a few lines, others pages. They are mere glimpses of lives long forgotten. Stitched together they become inlays of a judiciously arranged mosaic of a shifting late eighteenth century universe on the verge then in the midst of permanent rupture. The reader is absorbed by these lives so delicately introduced by Julius Scott that what emerges is an entirely new understanding of human life under the daily oppression of the Atlantic slave system.

One of the longest sketches we get comes early on. In April 1793 the tenth regiment of the Royal Battalion stationed near Kingston, Jamaica issued a public call for the capture of two runaway musicians. Their names are given as Reed and Lees. There is nothing unique about this. Both men, we quickly learn, are part of a community of musicians who absconded from their duty in search of their own freedom in Jamaica. A year prior ten musicians left the regiment and the pattern likely continued after 1793. “Warmly pursued” the fugitive musicians moved around Kingston’s seedy ‘Damnation alley’ in disguise tracking a route from port to plantation, and, Scott suggests, avoided capture (36).

The facts for this composite are taken from slim references of a few inches of column space in the *Royal Gazette* stretched across four dates. That is all. The story that is created from them, an irresistible tale of black “Jingling Johnnies” and white flutists and clarinetists on the run in Jamaica while the wider world around them is engulfed in revolution, is part of the art of the book. Scott, a passionate lover of Jazz, would not have passed his eyes over the notices when reading every extant page of that antique serial. It is telling that he spends time on a discussion of the history of music performance and borrowing of the repertory of the folk music of the enslaved by British musicians as he lays out the context for the escaped members of the tenth

regiment. He is concerned at each step in the book with flow; of bodies, ideas, laws, thoughts and sounds. There is a sonic vocabulary of “crashing cymbals” and the “beating of kettledrums” as Scott weaves a soundscape into his account of war. But what is remarkable about this piece is not simply Scott’s attentiveness to the details of the musicians. It is his examination of how their actions formed a part of a larger history of the period. The fusing of the peculiar with the grand narrative reveals a great deal about Scott’s approach to history.

The soul of *The Common Wind* is its visionary exposure of a “masterless class,” a mobile, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, aggregation of free and unfree people whose floating presence in the Atlantic world contested the authority of imperial control. Scott’s epic is anchored by them. He accepts that news of war and rumors of war, freedom and revolution circulated widely across the Americas. His goal is more ambitious than proving this fact. It is to explain how information traveled by the common wind: “that regional network of communication which bound together the societies of Afro-America” (118). The masterless class are carriers of information that passes from lip to hand and information has always been a vital commodity in a region tied by proximity, commerce, and exploitation.

When more than three decades ago he embarked on this committed pursuit of his masterless people, Scott, the Duke graduate student, had no model. The study of Atlantic World slavery was evolving steadily. Brilliant social histories joined the canon such as Edward ‘Kamau’ Brathwaite’s seminal, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (1971). These studies broadened the long focus on the economics of plantation slavery. They also started the process of fulfilling the energetic plea of Elsa Goveia, the dean of modern Caribbean history. In 1956 Goveia urged her peers and successors to “seek, beyond the narrative of events, a wider understanding of the thoughts, habits, and institutions of a whole society.”¹ The pace to accomplish this was slow. It required great tenacity to search through unconventional sources for outlines of social life. There was also a strong bias for metropolitan sources that had to be

¹ Elsa V. Goveia, *A Study of the Historiography of the British West Indies to the end of the Nineteenth Century* (Mexico: Instituto Panamericano e Geografia y historia, 1956), 178.

overcome. Increasingly historians of the region were compelled to explore methods beyond history in order to find ways of reaching the people whose experiences shaped the modern Atlantic. In the 1970s this disciplinary crossing was in its infancy but its outcomes, as Brathwaite's classic made clear, were substantial. Guided by this inclination to go below the surface of the story of plantation society's formation and collapse in the nineteenth century, historians had to think beyond the borders of the field and of the countries they studied.

Whatever hunch precipitated Scott's investigations of a borderless society that existed on land and sea, once he set about his work, he created a model of his own. It is not so much the details he extracts from the archives as the probity with which he treats the material that gives Scott's work its deserved legend. From his travels across the Atlantic—in an era, it must be said, when research in Caribbean and Latin American sources required a greater investment of time, patience and resources than in our digital age—and examination of texts in multiple languages, Scott's perspective was transformed. It is hard not to read into the sensitive way he treats his material a close observation of human behavior. His perceptions of everyday life in the eighteenth century are so sharply fine-tuned they betray a deeper understanding of the struggle for personal freedom beyond that which is gleaned from the archives. This approach alerts him to the marginalia which become the building material of his construction. Music again makes the case. There was an absence of reporting on Saint-Domingue in the Jamaican press in the wake of the August 1791 revolt. When Scott writes, "one searches in vain, for example, for any accounts from the French colony in the pages of Jamaica's most informative weekly newspaper," it is without question that this is in fact what he has done. But he does not let that "white silence" inhibit him. Elsewhere he finds references to enslaved people in Jamaica altering lyrics of folk songs to include verses on the rebellion. In Jamaica, "the revolt of the French slaves had found expression in the oral culture of the slaves" (144). His expansion of this point centers the popular response that existed beyond the pale of officialdom.

Fleeting details in the records are presented, paused over, and solicitously explained throughout the book. In Venezuela, Curaçao, St. Thomas, Grenada, the U.S. South, the British

islands, Cuba; everywhere his masterless class travels, Scott follows and finds how they transported news and inspired responses to the story of what was taking place in Saint-Domingue. Some of these stories are well-known. Denmark Vesey in South Carolina; the Coro Revolt in Venezuela; the Berbice revolt; and, of course, the progress of the revolt that widened from Cap Français and eventually led to revolution. By placing them within the context of black sailors, wharfingers, and traveling news carriers across the Americas, Scott makes the large point that in the age of revolution everyone's experience mattered.

The patience with which Scott assembled his evidence is extraordinary and much a part of the book's success. To do this he had to pore over volumes of well-studied material in search of pieces that by themselves cannot be conclusive but together give us a complete world. This meant casting fresh eyes over every wayward notice. It also meant he had to abandon some of the practices of his forebears and question everything anew.

Yet this is only half of the achievement. To make any coherence from all this data requires a crafter of special ability. An arc emerges from the collection of these disparate traces. The book is chronologically ordered but it is wrong to evaluate it as step by step history. The crosscurrents he carefully builds in each chapter are tightly balanced so that the narrative never runs from him. Each piece of the puzzle, unearthed by hard labor, is fitted with others within a larger frame of constant movement of people and ideas. The more he delves into the material the greater his insight. Nothing in the book is insignificant. Consider his treatment in a late chapter of the burning of a Thomas Paine effigy in Savanna-La-Mar Jamaica in 1793. The source is a newspaper reference. Scott follows his vivid description of this episode designed by officials to dissuade their captives from replicating Paine's ideas, with a series of questions. Scott asks, "To what extent did the dynamics of slave societies affect or alter the character and meaning of such political rituals?" "Did blacks see themselves as active participants in the politics of revolution and counter-revolution or were such things as effigy burning simply confusing and peripheral to their concerns?" (157).

He ponders these questions that his sources cannot answer for him. He is well aware of their limitations and draws attention to them by thinking through the event from the perspective of the spectators. He sees a “whole society” to use Goveia’s words. It is not simply the event of a contemporaneous English activity in the Caribbean that concerns him. It is the human response to it, that deeper meaning which historians must force themselves to deal with. Those spectators are people of history with their own determined sense of what they choose to accept and reject. The lesson here is important: to understand the place of the oppressed in history is to contemplate what they made of their society even in the absence of their voice. The witnesses, Scott speculates, “likely came away with a sense of the issues which conflicted with the intentions of the sponsors”(157-8). The passage ends with an exquisite dénouement. Two months after the burning a man is arrested in Spanish Town and his given name is “John Paine” (158). The effect of this last line is masterful. It is Scott the gifted writer in full command of his sources able to find a pulse in the dust.

It is the writer that makes this story sentient. Like his subjects he is a carrier of experiences showing us a vast world touched by the passage of the common wind. Scott is at his best when he takes the time to eloquently sketch a scene. When he needs to, he allows for reasonable speculation. As the contours of the history of the 1790s shift with the complications of war in Europe and the military campaigns in the French colony, Scott manages to deftly keep the whole in view.

The revolt in Saint-Domingue arrives in full bloom in chapter four and there is no overwrought expression of drama in the prose. It is the eruption of what had been building for years and we are prepared for it having been guided into this crowded and fluid space of the circum-Caribbean. The systems of control cannot suppress it. The networks of communication are uncontrollable and in the last quarter of the book what white officials and planters saw as a cataclysmic ending of the world as they knew it, is presented as a burning torch of hope passed on by transients across the seas. This influence is measured not only by imitation but by a new

concept of black freedom that endures. We cannot see the Haitian Revolution in any other way after Scott's presentation.

In the epilogue Scott outlines the passage of the Haitian Revolution after independence, identifying how its achievements continued to be carried across the Americas along the same routes that he traces. One famous carrier was the Jamaican John Russwurm. In an 1826 valedictory address at his alma mater, Bowdoin College--a speech not discussed in the book but personally favored by Scott--Russwurm captured the sentiment of his generation. "Can we conceive of anything which can cheer the desponding spirit, can reanimate and stimulate it to put everything to the hazard? Liberty can do this. Such were its effects upon the Haitians."² And, as Julius Scott's legendary study shows us, such were its effects upon people before and after 1804.

The Common Wind is a rare work by a rare scholar. For decades it was arguably the most cited dissertation in Atlantic World studies, and Scott's methods have been ingested by students of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as much as investigators of the age of revolution. It has created its own network of communication over this time transforming the course of the study of Atlantic History. The traces of its influence exist in the pages of three decades of scholarship that have proceeded its belated publication. Now as a book it can take its rightful place on the shelf alongside the classics such as James, Williams, Goveia, Brathwaite, Foner, Rebecca Scott, that have remade our view of the Atlantic past. The long overdue publication of *The Common Wind* returns us to its brilliance and projects that magic unto future generations of historians who are challenged to do as Scott has done--envision the society whole.

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² John B. Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti," 1826, BlackPast.org, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1826-john-b-russwurm-condition-and-prospects-haiti/>, accessed 9 October 2019.

